How to handle a bully

Mark Tyrrell

Bullying is an activity which most people associate with their schooldays. The playground bully is a well-established stereotype. But sadly, bullying does not disappear when you walk out the school gates for the last time. It can be a real shock to people when they find themselves, as an adult, being bullied by another adult.

At school, you theoretically have access to 'authority' to help you combat bullying. But who do you turn to when you are being bullied at work? Who will believe you?

This lack of obvious recourse is, of course, what the workplace bully relies on. Conscientious employers, like good schools, will have a policy for dealing with inappropriate behaviour among their employees, including bullying. But not all employers are conscientious, or competent, and it can be difficult for the individual who is being bullied to know how to handle the situation.

In this article, I am going to set out a basic protocol for dealing with a bully that can be adapted to particular circumstances. Some bullies, of course, are not going to be open to reason, but it's still worth attempting to confront their behaviour directly, as this can be surprisingly effective if handled properly.

If you ever need to confront a bully, or wish to help someone else do so, it helps if you avoid bringing emotion into it any more than you have to. Although bullies are curiously insightful about what makes people 'tick', and how to press their most sensitive buttons, they are at the same time often utterly lacking in the empathy necessary to respond appropriately to how people feel. If you mention how you feel, a bully will simply tell you that you are 'wrong' or 'stupid' to feel that way. So talk in terms of what you 'think' rather than what you 'feel'.

Use non-emotive language and stick closely to the facts. Deal with one 'incident' at a time, rather than trying to address every occasion when they wronged you all at once.

Think carefully about what you are going to say, and rehearse it in your mind or with a friend in advance.

How to confront a bully – five steps

1. Tell them you want to talk to them privately about the incident and that one other person will be present. (Ensure that the 'other person' is a neutral individual who will be a reliable witness.)

2. At the meeting, tell them why you think this behaviour is a bad idea. Don't make accusations or bring emotion into it.

3. Tell them what you want them to do instead in future.

4. Tell them why this will be better for **both** of you.

5. Seek agreement with them that things will change.

If they renege on the agreement, remind them of this meeting and that there was a witness. Ask them what's changed since the meeting and why they haven't stuck to their agreement. It may be necessary to repeat the process.

So for, example, if the person who is bullying you shouts at you in front of other staff members, this process might go as follows:

Ask for a meeting	"I want to speak to you about you shouting at me in front of other staff members. XXX will also be present."
What's wrong	"When you do this, it makes us both appear unprofessional to other staff and clients."
What you want	"I think it's would be much better in future if we agree that you speak to me in the office in private if you have anything to say to me."
How both will benefit	"This will make us both appear more professional and keep our working relationship intact."
Seek agreement	"So can we agree to do it this way in future?" (And if not, get them to tell you exactly why not, so you can negotiate further)

Remember that bullies are looking for an emotional reaction from people – not calm problem-solving responses.

While you are talking to them, maintain eye contact. Don't smile too much or look away too often, as this can indicate submissiveness.

Emotional preparation

Many victims of bullying may say: “This is all very well, but when I am in the situation with this person, I just panic and can’t think properly.”

This is a valid point. A way around this is to change your emotional response to them by using your imagination beforehand to prime your instincts to respond with calm during these times.

So the more you **imagine** speaking to the person like this while feeling deeply relaxed, the more natural it’s going to be to naturally and automatically feel calm when it comes time to confront the bully.

You need to prepare emotionally as well as plan what you are going to say. It may help to work with someone skilled in the use of hypnosis to change your instinctive emotional response to this person.

For an in depth look at what underlies bullying, see ‘*Understanding bullies and bullying*’.

View this article online: How to handle a bully

Copyright Uncommon Knowledge Ltd 2006
www.uncommon-knowledge.co.uk